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MEDICAL DOCUMENTATION IN THE USSR

[Comment: This report presents an editorial published under the title "One Must Raise the Level of Scientific Information" in Meditsinskiy Rabotnik, Vol 18, No 85, 18 October 1955.]

Effective progress in the field of public health cannot be insured without giving adequate information on the latest achievements of USSR and foreign medicine to physicians and workers at universities and scientific research institutes. This information is disseminated by the contribution of articles to medical journals publication of books, and distribution of books directly or through the medium of libraries. Scientific meetings also serve as a means of disseminating scientific medical information. One of the principal tasks of the Academy of Medical Sciences USSR is to aid in the dissemination of scientific information and of the latest experience in medicine.

Notwithstanding the extensive opportunities for the dissemination of medical information which are available, the organization of widely accessible medical documentation leaves much to be desired.

One may illustrate this by the following example. Over the years a great number of documents dealing with important inventions and with proposals aiming at increased efficiency have accumulated in the archives of the Ministry of Health USSR in the form of applications for authors' certificates [patents]. However, nobody knows anything about the contents of these documents with the exception of a limited number of persons at the Scientific Council of the Ministry of Health USSR.

The publication of bulletins dealing with new developments in medical procedures and medical technology has not been organized as yet, although such bulletins would disseminate information on progress as far as inventions and improved techniques are concerned.

The role of medical periodicals is particularly important in the dissemination of scientific information. On the pages of these periodicals, thousands of scientific articles are published which are of great theoretical and practical value. One may regard this with satisfaction. Under the circumstances, how can the boards of editors of the periodicals and the State Medical Publishing House (Medgiz) reconcile themselves to the fact that some articles lie around for months or even years before being published? One cannot regard it as normal that the periodicals Klinicheskaya Meditsina and Pediatrics published material in 1955 that had been contributed by the authors in 1952 or 1953.

The necessity of publishing compiled annotations as supplements to the periodicals arose a long time ago. One can also find other means of disseminating information, if adequate attention is paid to this matter. The situation is particularly bad as far as publication of abstracts is concerned. Although abstracts cannot serve as a substitute for the original publications, they enable scientific workers and practical physicians to find their way around in the medical literature and to form some ideas in regard to achievements in the field of public health.

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Although the periodical Sovetskoye Meditsinskoye Referativnoye Obozreniye covers all principal subdivisions of medicine, it does not yet possess sufficient authority among the majority of readers. This is explained not only by the small circulation of this periodical, but also by the fact that the scientific work covered by it has been published a year or even 2-3 years prior to abstracting. Furthermore, the quality of the abstracts published in it is not very high. The editors of Sovetskoye Meditsinskoye Referativnoye Obozreniye publish long abstracts of articles which have appeared in such widespread periodicals as Sovetskaya Meditsina, Khirurgiya, etc. On the other hand, the abstracts of articles published in languages of peoples of the union republics other than Russian are excessively brief. As a rule, dissertations are not abstracted, notwithstanding the fact that many of them give valuable and interesting information.

A number of institutes also do not pay sufficient attention to scientific documentation. Thus, the Kazakh Medical Institute has recently published a collection of annotations [summaries] and abstracts which cover the scientific output of this higher educational institution for a period of 20 years. Among other things, this book contains annotations of administrative reports by S. M. Sidorov, I. S. Koryakin, and some other members of the institute which do not have the slightest scientific value. The book has been published carelessly and has been poorly edited. Unfortunately, this case of the publication by an institute of incidental and irrelevant material is not unique.

The directors of scientific institutions must seriously concentrate on the important matter of documentation. One must not forget that scientific documentation reflects the progress achieved at clinics, laboratories, and institutes. If some people publish the contents of the wastebasket under the guise of scientific work, they inflict harm on an activity which is of the greatest importance for the state as a whole.

The July [1955] plenary session of the Central Committee CPSU has emphasized in its resolutions the necessity of constantly studying everything that is new, advanced and creative not only in national science and technology, but also within the scope of developments that take place abroad. This also applies to the fullest extent as far as medicine is concerned. Consequently complete, comprehensive, and timely information on the achievements of foreign medicine is needed.

Very little has been done in this direction. The Scientific Council of the Ministry of Health USSR and the Presidium of the Academy of Medical Sciences USSR put up patiently with the fact that so far no abstract journal is available which reflects in an effective manner the state of clinical medicine abroad. It is very annoying that the majority of our medical periodicals are not as yet in any real sense disseminators of everything progressive that originates in world science. On the pages of the periodicals, one seldom finds abstracts, book reviews, and general reviews of foreign publications. Among the authors who contribute to the periodicals there is an inexcusably small number of foreign scientists. Medgiz has not organized a systematic publication in translation of the best foreign monographs and manuals. Bibliographic handbooks of foreign medical publications are almost entirely lacking.

To inform engineering and technical workers of new developments in foreign technology, the Academy of Sciences USSR publishes special bulletins expeditiously. It would not be a bad idea if the Academy of Medical Sciences USSR organized the publication of similar bulletins dealing with the most important research done by foreign scientists.

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It is obvious that scientific documentation must not be one-sided. The interest evinced by scientists of the whole world towards Soviet medicine is immense; our contacts with progressive scientists of other countries are expanding daily and will expand to a still greater extent in the future. An effective means of maintaining contacts with foreign scientists is the exchange of publications, mutual participation of Soviet scientists and foreign scientists at scientific meetings, etc.

Taking this into consideration, our medical periodicals, the popularity of which among foreign scientists constantly increases, ought to supplement every published article by an abstract, however brief, written in one of the languages which are officially accepted at scientific meetings. This will make our periodical literature more accessible to our foreign friends.

One of the most effective channels for the rapid and extensive dissemination of information are medical libraries. Although these libraries have at their disposal large accumulations of published matter, they have not as yet become active disseminators of scientific information. The libraries as a rule do not have the necessary manuals and are not equipped with a single subject catalog. Microfilm techniques are a good tool in medical documentation activities. It is regrettable that even the libraries located in large cities and libraries of scientific research institutions do not make use of microfilm techniques.

The meetings of scientific societies and other scientific meetings must be utilized more widely for the dissemination of scientific information. We still encounter the harmful practice of limiting to a small group the information presented at clinical conferences of institutes, i. e., meetings which summarize scientific work on some definite problem. Practicing physicians, who would like to acquire information on new developments at the source where these developments originate, must be assured of greater access to scientific institutions. The directors of research institutions and of public health organs have a major stake in informing practicing physicians of the newest developments in medical science.

The Scientific Council of the Ministry of Health USSR and the Presidium of the Academy of Medical Sciences USSR must organize a well-thought-out, smoothly working, and well-coordinated system of scientific documentation. One cannot rely on unorganized activities in this important endeavor.

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